

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Medal of Honor to Sergeant First Class Leroy A. Petry

July 12, 2011

The President. Thank you, Chaplain Rutherford. Please be seated. Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the White House as we present our Nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, to an extraordinary American soldier, Sergeant First Class Leroy Petry.

This is a historic occasion. Last fall, I was privileged to present the Medal of Honor to Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta for his heroism in Afghanistan, and Sal joins us this afternoon. Where's Sal? Good to see you.

So today is only the second time during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, indeed, only the second time since Vietnam, that a recipient of the Medal of Honor from an ongoing conflict has been able to accept this medal in person. And having just spent some time with Leroy, his lovely wife Ashley, their wonderful children, in the Oval Office, then had a chance to see the entire Petry family here, I have to say this could not be happening to a nicer guy or a more inspiring family.

Leroy, the Medal of Honor reflects the deepest gratitude of our entire Nation. So we're joined by Members of Congress, Vice President Biden, leaders from across my administration, including Deputy Secretary of Defense Bill Lynn, and leaders from across our Armed Forces, including the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jim "Hoss" Cartwright, Army Secretary John McHugh, and Army Chief of Staff General Marty Dempsey.

We're honored to welcome more than 100 of Leroy's family and friends, many from his home State of New Mexico, as well as his fellow Rangers from the legendary Delta Company, 2d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. And as always, we are humbled by the presence of members of the Medal of Honor Society.

Today we honor a singular act of gallantry. Yet as we near the 10th anniversary of the attacks that thrust our Nation into war, this is also an occasion to pay tribute to a soldier and a generation that has borne the burden of our security during a hard decade of sacrifice.

I want to take you back to the circumstances that led to this day. It's May 26, 2008, in the remote east of Afghanistan, near the mountainous border of Pakistan. Helicopters carrying dozens of elite Army Rangers race over the rugged landscape. And their target is an insurgent compound. The mission is high risk. It's broad daylight. The insurgents are heavily armed. But it's considered a risk worth taking because intelligence indicates that a top Al Qaida commander is in that compound.

Soon, the helicopters touch down, and our Rangers immediately come under fire. Within minutes, Leroy, then a Staff Sergeant, and another soldier are pushing ahead into a courtyard, surrounded by high mud walls. And that's when the enemy opens up with their AK-47s. Leroy is hit in both legs. He's bleeding badly, but he summons the strength to lead the other Ranger to cover, behind a chicken coop. He radios for support. He hurls a grenade at the enemy, giving cover to a third Ranger who rushes to their aid. An enemy grenade explodes nearby, wounding Leroy's two comrades. And then a second grenade lands, this time, only a few feet away.

Every human impulse would tell someone to turn away. Every soldier is trained to seek cover. That's what Sergeant Leroy Petry could have done. Instead, this wounded Ranger, this 28-year-old man with his whole life ahead of him, this husband and father of four, did something extraordinary. He lunged forward, toward the live grenade. He picked it up. He cocked his arm to throw it back.

What compels such courage? What leads a person to risk everything so that others might live? For answers, we don't need to look far. The roots of Leroy's valor are all around us.

We see it in the sense of duty instilled by his family, who joins us today: his father Larry, his mother Lorella, and his four brothers. Growing up, the walls of their home were hung with pictures of grandfathers and uncles in uniform, leading a young Leroy to believe "that's my calling too."

We see it in the compassion of a high school student who overcame his own struggles to mentor younger kids to give them a chance. We see it in the loyalty of an Army Ranger who lives by a creed: Never shall I fail my comrades. Or as Leroy puts it, "These are my brothers, family just like my wife and kids, and you protect the ones you love." And that's what he did that day when he picked up that grenade and threw it back, just as it exploded.

With that selfless act, Leroy saved his two Ranger brothers, and they are with us today. His valor came with a price. The force of the blast took Leroy's right hand. Shrapnel riddled his body. Said one of his teammates, "I had never seen someone hurt so bad." So even his fellow Rangers were amazed at what Leroy did next. Despite his grievous wounds, he remained calm. He actually put on his own tourniquet. And he continued to lead, directing his team, giving orders, even telling the medics how to treat his wounds.

When the fight was won, as he lay in a stretcher being loaded onto a helicopter, one of his teammates came up to shake the hand that Leroy had left. "That was the first time I shook the hand of someone who I consider to be a true American hero," that Ranger said. Leroy Petry "showed that true heroes still exist and that they're closer than you think."

That Ranger is right. Our heroes are all around us. They're the millions of Americans in uniform who have served these past 10 years, many, like Leroy, deploying tour after tour, year after year. On the morning of 9/11, Leroy was training to be a Ranger, and as his instructor got the terrible news, they told Leroy and his class, "Keep training, you might be going to war." Within months Leroy was in Afghanistan for the first of seven deployments since 9/11.

Leroy speaks proudly of the progress our troops have made: Afghan communities now free from the terror of the Taliban and Afghan forces that are taking more responsibility for their security. And he carries with him the memories of Americans who have made the ultimate sacrifice to make this progress possible.

Earlier in the Oval Office, Leroy gave me the extraordinary privilege of showing me the small plaque that is bolted to his prosthetic arm. On it are the names of the fallen Rangers from the 75th Regiment. They are, quite literally, part of him, just as they will always be part of America.

One of those names is of the Ranger who did not come back from the raid that day, Specialist Christopher Gathercole. Christopher's brother and sister and grandmother are here with us today. I would ask that they stand briefly so that we can show our gratitude for their family's profound sacrifice.

Our heroes are all around us. They're the force behind the force: military spouses like Ashley, who during Leroy's many deployments, during missed birthdays and holidays, has kept this family "Army Strong." So we're grateful to you, Ashley, and for all the military spouses who are here.

They're military children, like Brittany and Austin and Reagan, and 7-year-old Landon, who at the end of a long day is there to gently rub his dad's injured arm. And so I want to make sure that we acknowledge these extraordinary children as well.

Our heroes are all around us. They're our men and women in uniform who through a decade of war have earned their place among the greatest of generations. During World War II, on D-day, it was the Rangers of D Company who famously scaled the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc. After 9/11, we learned again: "Rangers Lead the Way." They were some of the first boots on the ground in Afghanistan. They have been deployed continuously ever since.

Today, we can see our progress in this war and our success against Al Qaida, and we're beginning to bring our troops home from Afghanistan this summer. Understand, there will be more fighting and more sacrifices in the months and years to come. But I am confident that because of the service of men and women like Leroy, we will be able to say of this generation what President Reagan once said of those Rangers who took the cliffs on D-day: "These are the heroes who helped end a war."

I would ask all of our Rangers, members of the 9/11 generation, to stand and accept the thanks of a grateful nation.

Finally, the service of Leroy Petry speaks to the very essence of America, that spirit that says, no matter how hard the journey, no matter how steep the climb, we don't quit. We don't give up. Leroy lost a hand and those wounds in his legs sometimes make it hard for him to stand. But he pushes on, and even joined his fellow Rangers for a grueling 20-mile march. He could have focused only on his own recovery, but today he helps care for other wounded warriors, inspiring them with his example. Given his wounds, he could have retired from the Army, with honor, but he chose to reenlist, indefinitely. And this past year he returned to Afghanistan—his eighth deployment—back with his Ranger brothers on another mission to keep our country safe.

This is the stuff of which heroes are made. This is the strength, the devotion that makes our troops the pride of every American. And this is the reason that, like a soldier named Leroy Petry, America doesn't simply endure, we emerge from our trials stronger, more confident, with our eyes fixed on the future.

Our heroes are all around us. And as we prepare for the reading of the citation, please join me in saluting one of those heroes, Leroy Petry.

[At this point, Maj. Reginald McClam, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal.]

The President. Can you give Leroy a big round of applause?

[Brig. Gen. Donald L. Rutherford, USA, Deputy Chief of Chaplains, said a prayer.]

The President. Thank you all for attending this extraordinary ceremony for this extraordinary hero. I hope that all of you will join the family. There is going to be an outstanding reception. I hear the food is pretty good around here. *[Laughter]* And I know the music is great because we've got my own Marine Band playing.

So thank you so much for your attendance. And once again, congratulations, Leroy, for your extraordinary devotion to our country.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:23 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to PFC Lucas Robinson, USA, and Sgt. Daniel Higgins, USA, D Company, 2d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment; Edward F. Gathercole, brother, Jennifer Daly, sister, and Maryann Haines, grandmother, of SPC Gathercole, USA; and Brittany Velotta, Austin West, and Reagan West, stepchildren, Lorella Tapia, mother, and Larry A., Lloyd, Lyndon, and Lincoln Petry, brothers, of SFC Petry, USA.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Congressional Medal of Honor :: Petry, SFC Leroy A., presentation.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Cartwright, James E. "Hoss"; Daly, Jennifer; Dempsey, Martin E.; Gathercole, Edward F.; Giunta, Salvatore A.; Haines, Maryann; Higgins, Daniel; Lynn, William J., III; McHugh, John M.; Petry, Ashley; Petry, Landon; Petry, Larry ; Petry, Larry A.; Petry, Leroy A.; Petry, Lincoln; Petry, Lloyd; Petry, Lyndon; Robinson, Lucas; Rutherford, Donald L.; Tapia, Lorella; Velotta, Brittany; West, Austin; West, Reagan.

Subjects: Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Afghanistan : Former regime; Afghanistan : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Army, Department of the : Chief of Staff; Army, Department of the : Secretary; Decorations, medals, and awards : Congressional Medal of Honor; Defense, Department of : Deputy Secretary; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; White House Office : Vice President.

DCPD Number: DCPD201100502.